Barbarians Remix: Horse Racing, History, and the Final Champion's Day in Old Shanghai

Interview with historian and author James Carter

Jeremiah: Hello and welcome to the Barbarians at the Gate podcast. My name is Jeremiah Jenne and I am here with my co-host David Moser. We are really pleased today to be joined by James Carter. He is a professor at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, where he teaches and researches late imperial and modern China. He earned his PhD under Jonathan Spence and is the author of two books: *Heart of Buddha, Heart of China: The Life of Tan Xu, a 20th Century Monk*, and *Creating a Chinese Harbin: Nationalism in an International City, 1916 to 1932*.
He has a great new book out called *Champion's Day*. It takes a look at the city of Shanghai from the perspective of the racetrack, one of the most important sites in colonial Shanghai. Thank you so much for joining us, Jay. How are you doing?

James Carter: It is my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

David: Let's just dive in. There is a lot to talk about. Jay, I remember a couple of years ago when you were telling me about this project, and I was intrigued by the idea of the narrative. Having read through it, I felt like I was watching *Pulp Fiction* because of the way all the threads weave in and out, centering on one unified narrative. Tell us a little bit about the history of this project. It is the story of Shanghai's racing world, but it is also the story of the city and the community. What was it about the racetrack and the Champions Cup that inspired this particular narrative structure?

James Carter: I appreciate the praise. I worked hard on the narrative structure and it changed quite a bit as things progressed. Asking about its origins is a good way to get into the book's significance. I have realized that what really interests me is China's relations with the West.
When I was writing about Harbin, it was about a colony that had been taken over by the Chinese government after the Russian Revolution and the way it became a Chinese city. With Tan Xu, the monk Jeremiah mentioned, he was traveling around founding temples in opposition to Western colonialism. He founded temples in Harbin, Qingdao, and other places. As I discovered that was the track I was taking, I wanted to find another place to explore that theme.

I also wanted to find someplace easier to work than Harbin, which was not very welcoming to researchers. Shanghai seemed the natural place. Looking at a location where foreigners and Chinese interacted, you cannot get a more dynamic location than Shanghai. The center of Shanghai is this racetrack. I found that a good way to tell the story would be to use a single day.

At the origins of the research, I was going to make it much denser. The book was going to begin at dawn and end at sundown, covering just one day. The final version delves much further into the past, so the last section focuses on that one day, but there is a lot more background. I still like that structure because it allowed me to bring in many different stories and wrap them into a single cable to show the nature of the relationship between China and the West at this particular moment.

International Colonialism and the Treaty Port

Jeremiah: Shanghai is a really interesting city because it is always held up as the example of the treaty port. There were many ports that qualified as treaty ports and many concession areas in China, but Shanghai is the one everyone thinks of.
We always try to find a way to characterize the relationship between the West and China in this period. There is the old chestnut you see in Chinese texts: the idea that this was an era of semi-feudalism and semi-colonialism. That term has always been a little bit jarring for me. In your book, you describe Shanghai, following Isabella Jackson, as an example of transnational colonialism. Can you tell us more about what that means and how it helps us understand Shanghai in a way that semi-colonialism doesn't?

James Carter: I am glad you picked up on that phrase. Isabella Jackson, a historian in Ireland who studied under Robert Bickers, formulated this notion of international colonialism. What she sees as being important is that it was not a colony of any one nation. Instead, it was colonized by a bunch of different nations that were competing with one another. Because they were competing, no single one of them was able to get the kind of dominance needed to enforce a standard colonial regime.
This helps explain why colonialism in Shanghai had a cosmopolitan flavor. It was not because people were necessarily more progressive or enlightened, it was that they were limited in what they could accomplish because they had to negotiate with other powers. If you were British, you had to negotiate with Americans, French, Germans, and Japanese, all in the context of being surrounded by China. International colonialism is a way of getting at the notion that it was not quite fully colonial, and yet it certainly looked and walked and smelled like colonialism.

The Charlie Chan Comparison

David: The book has great quotes. I like the characterization that the "Shanghai solution" was cosmopolitan, racist, pragmatic, cooperative, and cynical. In another section, you compare Shanghai with the movie detective Charlie Chan.
You talk about the Charlie Chan analogy as being a global brand full of stereotypes and contradictions, with surprising substance and importance, but ultimately operating according to Western rules. With all the issues of racism in the news today, this book seems very relevant. Can you talk about that aspect of Shanghai?

James Carter: For those interested in the deeper story, Yunte Huang wrote a great book on Charlie Chan a couple of years ago. The reason Charlie Chan came up in my book was that one of the movies, *Murder Over New York*, was opening on Champions Day. In the last section of the book, where I go through the day hour by hour, that opening was one of the things happening.
Charlie Chan is both horrifying and complex. You have actors like Warner Oland or Sidney Toler dressed up in yellowface, which is appalling. On the other hand, Charlie Chan is always the smartest person in the room. He is the one who solves the crime. Yet, he talks in a stilted English and everyone calls him Charlie, even though he addresses everyone else by formal titles.

My description was meant to show that Charlie Chan is not simply a caricature. He has depth, but he is ultimately controlled by Westerners and defined by not being white. That is important to keep in mind in Shanghai. If we dismiss Shanghai the way the PRC sometimes did, as purely a den of imperialism, we limit our understanding of the multicultural aspects that made it unique.

At the same time, if you argue that Shanghai was a magical fusion where everyone got along, you are also wrong. Most of Shanghai's population was Chinese, well over 90 percent. While some were wealthy, many more were not. It was a racist society formed according to Western rules. We can look to the past to learn from what was good and what was bad without trying to recreate it. That message is valuable now when we live in a time of xenophobia and racism around the world.

A Cast of Characters: From Mississippi to Jiangwan

David: The cast of characters is at the heart of the book. Some I was familiar with, like Du Yuesheng, but others were new to me. Who was your favorite character, or who did you find most representative of this era?

James Carter: In terms of the people at the center of the story, Arthur Henchman and Cornell Franklin are key. Cornell Franklin gets a lot of attention because he is an American. He is a remarkable figure who came from Mississippi, moved to Hawaii, and then to Shanghai. All those places were structured around a strict racial hierarchy. A bit of trivia: his wife eventually left him for William Faulkner.

Franklin is interesting, though perhaps not admirable. He is the person who tries to go back after the war to get "Old Shanghai" back, and he fails. But the person I admired most was probably the architect Dong Dayou. He went to Tsinghua and was also educated in Rome and Minnesota. He returned to design the new Shanghai city center in Jiangwan, north of the International Settlement.

He had a bold vision for what China was going to be, one that did not simply recreate architectural tropes from the past. He wanted to reclaim the city from colonial powers. People were already talking about reclaiming the settlements in the 1930s. Dong Dayou

stayed in China after the war and the revolution, continuing to work as an architect in the People's Republic. He suffered quite a bit in the Cultural Revolution. He is a character I have a lot of sympathy for because you see him navigate that international environment, go through the trauma of war, and stay to experience what came out on the other side.

Jeremiah: One of the characters I liked was Victor Sassoon. He was involved in the racing, and when he joined, everyone despaired because he simply bought all the champion horses. It makes me think that even 100 years ago, there was a need for a salary cap in sports.

James Carter: Yes, he plays the George Steinbrenner role in the Shanghai Race Club.

The Symbolism of the Racetrack

Jeremiah: Horse racing is such an indelible part of the foreign presence in China. In the history of Beijing, the Paomachang racetrack west of the city was a fixture in the social calendar. It symbolized the foreign presence so much that it was one of the first things the Boxers burned down in 1900. What is it about race courses that made them such an important symbol of the culture of colonialism in China?

James Carter: I think it is because it is quintessentially British. If colonialism in China was defined by Britain, then the horse races came to represent that. There was an attempt to recreate British leisure and sporting life.

When I was researching Harbin in the 1990s, I found there was a racecourse there as well. One of the first things the Japanese did when they established Manchukuo was raise the Japanese flag at the racecourse. It was a highly symbolic gesture. Beyond that, racetracks were physically overwhelming. They took up enormous spaces in the city. You could not help but be awed by them.

When I started looking for a project on Chinese and Western interactions, I had a frustrated desire to be a sportswriter. Horse racing seemed like a great lens. There is a book called *China Races* by Austin Coates that has information on the dozen or more tracks around China. However, Coates had written that the last champions race was in May of 1941. I spent a week at the Xujiahui Library looking at the wrong day because of that.

As I did my research, I found they actually ran the champions in November. November 12th turned out to be a much better day for the book because it was a triptych of events. You had the Champion Stakes, the funeral of Liza Hardoon, a wealthy woman of mixed French and Chinese descent, and it was also Sun Yat-sen’s birthday. On the other side of town, there was a celebration for Sun Yat-sen’s birthday, a bizarre setting where a Chinese nationalist hero was being celebrated by a Japanese sponsored regime. These three physical spectacles all celebrated different aspects of colonial and semi-colonial life.

Nostalgia and the "Ickiness" of Old Shanghai

Jeremiah: This era is very easily romanticized. I enjoy books by people like Paul French, looking at the gangsters and the demimonde. Even now, there is a sort of "Shanghai chic" nostalgia. Yet, this glitz was made possible by systemic racism and colonial privilege. Is romanticizing this world just a little bit icky?

James Carter: I think "icky" is a good way to put it. It is something I have wrestled with. The first attempt by Anglophones to study China focused heavily on treaty ports and colonialism. Then there was a pushback to say this distorted our understanding because so much was happening that had nothing to do with foreigners.

I wrestle with whether focusing on the Shanghai Race Club is romanticizing imperialism. The club was a symbol of imperialism, which is why it was shut down. But Shanghai also represented something fabulous. The question is, can we keep some of the fabulous and get rid of the ickiness? You cannot talk about Shanghai objectively without noting the structures of oppression hardwired into it.

I also want to hold on to the idea that something unique was created there that was not strictly Western or strictly Chinese. Shanghai is a city of immigrants. Most were from other parts of China, like Sichuan, Shandong, or Beijing, making a life there.

We need to hold on to the idea that internationalism can be a good thing. My colleague often talks about history as a hopeful exercise. We can acknowledge the parts that were just wrong and try to get things better next time.

Jeremiah: I think about this when I travel in Southeast Asia. Hotels will advertise the glamour of the 1930s in Singapore or elsewhere, and I think, sure, it was probably a cool time for someone who looked like me.

James Carter: The Shanghai government today is doing a bit of "Occidentalism." They want to keep the aesthetic that made Old Shanghai a golden era, the things that look nice and colonial, but they want to do them in a way where they keep control. I am not sure if that is a viable foundation.

Jeremiah, you are in Beijing. Does the fate of Qianmen give you confidence that restoring the past can be successful? I am afraid Shanghai may meet that same fate. They know what makes Shanghai special has a colonial element, and they are trying to inoculate themselves against what went before by putting those elements under a Chinese political structure.

Jeremiah: I remember there was pushback when a restaurant listed their address as being in the "French Concession." People online in China found that offensive.

James Carter: Yes, even if people still commonly refer to it as that when they are in the city.

David: Thanks so much, Jay, for making time for us. *Champion's Day: The End of Old Shanghai* gives some novel insights into a well-known era. It is a great introductory book but also a delight for those who know the city well.

Jeremiah: Thank you folks and join us again for another episode of Barbarians at the Gate.